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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

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Dogs Never Lie About Love: Reflections on the Emotional World of Dogs by **Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson**. ISBN: 0609600575, c1977, Crown Publishers, NY \$24.00

Reviewed by **Ellen Finnie Duranceau** (MIT Libraries)

Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson's *Dogs Never Lie About Love* is not a book difficult enough to leave you proud of an accomplishment upon turning the last page, nor is it a book which will teach you so much you will feel smugly superior when you put it down. It is not even a book that will keep you up reading too late. It is a satisfying book nonetheless, and one that makes you think about dogs, about people, and about the unique relationship between these two species. I believe that if your life has been touched by a dog, this book will resonate with you. However, to make some attempt at "full disclosure" I should reveal that my affliction with caninophilia is long-standing and rather pronounced. The first book I remember taking out from the public library was the *Rin Tin Tin Book of Dog Care*, which I devoured repeatedly, checking it out over and over again; as a pre-adolescent, I lived to read **Albert Payson Terhune's** series about Lad and the other Collies at Sunnybrook Farm, and wish for a dog on every candle of every cake from ages four through ten, until my long-awaited and much-adored Beagle arrived to accompany me through adolescence and beyond. So I suppose all I can really say is that if your dog history parallels mine even remotely, you will be touched by *Dogs Never Lie About Love*. In addition to this moving testament to the emotional landscape of the dog, Masson offers plenty of challenging ideas that, even if one does not agree with them, offer a place from which to consider important questions about the emotional lives of dogs, and by extension, other animals. (Masson, by the way, is also author of nine other nonfiction books, including *When Elephants Weep*, which deals directly with this topic.)

Since I've begun by saying so much about what this book is not, perhaps it is worth being complete by adding that it is not quite as entertaining (or as vexing) as **Elizabeth Marshall Thomas' *Hidden Life of Dogs***, nor as endearing as **James Herriot's *Dog Stories***, or as philosophical as **Vicki Hearne's *Bandit*** or ***Adam's Task***. What Masson does offer is a straightforward, heartfelt, fluid and (mostly) believable account of dogs' emotional life and their near-mystical bond with humans. The book itself is quite dog-like in its unabashed, trusting presentation of Masson's sometimes surprisingly idealistic views. Masson is frank about his faith in the telling anecdote, and his book is full of them. He relates stories of a dog who committed suicide, or at least willed his own death, following the tragic loss of the little boy he was so fond of; a noble dog who saved his master from drowning while the master was trying to drown the dog; a dog who waited for years at a train station for his dead master's arrival; and a dog who guarded his master's grave for many, many years, among other moving stories of blind devotion.

Most of the book, however, consists of Masson's reflections upon the actions of his own "pack" of three dogs: Sasha, a German Shepherd dropout from a guide-dog school; Sima, a Sheltie-Retriever mix; and Rani, a Labrador mixed with Rhodesian Ridgeback. He watches his dogs carefully, and concludes that "they feel more, and more purely and more intensely" than he does. In comparison with that of the dog, for Masson "the human emotional landscape seems murky with subterfuge and ambivalence and emotional deception, intentional or not." It is this purity of emotion that Masson emphasizes throughout his book, and he deeply admires the dog's ability to avoid "wast[ing] time brooding over the past or anxiously awaiting the dreaded future." He reflects, with reverence, that dogs are "always present." It is perhaps worth noting an irony that Masson does not discuss: that it is the human being's very ability to not be present — that is to anticipate, plan, and look forward and backward in time, the analytical, detached intel-

lect — that allows us to wistfully yearn for the dog's ability to be fully "present." Masson, in avoiding this point, seems to take for granted the notion, much in vogue, that being "in the moment" is a valuable and indeed enviable way of being. While this may well be the case, Masson needed to develop the point. He does imply that people are drawn to dogs in part because they achieve, what humans cannot: "a dog opens down into the delight of the moment — that allows us to wistfully yearn for the dog's ability to be fully 'present.'"

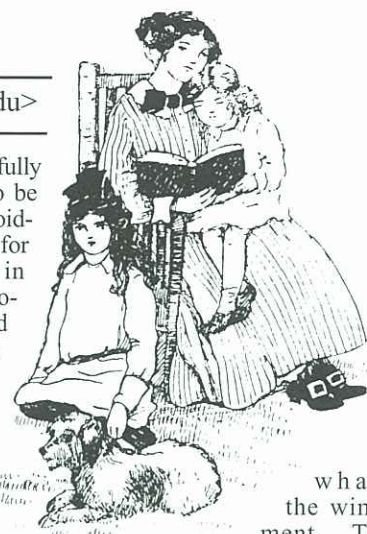
Masson is sure of his basic thesis, that dogs love humans. At one point he notes that "the capacity for love in the dog is so pronounced, so developed that it is almost like another sense or organ. It might well be termed hyperlove, and it is bestowed upon all humans who live closely with a dog." He says that "the dog is love, that dogs are all about love." (He takes his title from a comment a Guide Dog staff member made, which for Masson means that a dog is "incapable of denying how he feels.") Certainly anyone who has arrived home from a demanding or demeaning day at work to an enthusiastic canine greeting knows what the love of a dog can mean, and it is difficult to argue with Masson in terms of how we experience dogs in our lives.

In addition to love akin to the human experience of love, Masson is convinced that dogs also know shame, compassion, and can remember and hope. He bases these beliefs on his own observations of how a dog acts when he has done something wrong, when he sees another dog or a person hurt, when he recognizes people he has not seen for years, and when he waits by the door for his human pal to return, a look of alert expectation on his face. Masson does make an attempt to account for many of these behaviors in somewhat more scientific terms. Beyond observations and anecdote, he points out that cooperation and compassion have been observed in wolves, dogs' ancestors, and that the basic operating principle of domestication — neoteny, or the retention of juvenile traits into adulthood — has led to many of the endearing qualities of dogs. Wolves, for example, demonstrate many dog-like traits when they are young, but lose these as they mature. He notes that "a wolf behaves like a cub only as long as he is one, which is why a wolf cannot be truly tamed. As a wolf cub behaves towards his parents for a short period of his life, so a dog behaves towards us for the whole of his life."

In some ways, Masson's book suffers from the syndrome that some people feel plagues one of my favorite books, **Deborah Tannen's** fascinating and original study of gender differences in communication, *You Just Don't Understand*. Masson will state something that as soon as it is articulated, seems obvious, with the result that the revelation, while rewarding and revealing, is at the same time easy to dismiss, for one feels perhaps anyone could have made these observations. For example, Masson points out that "for once, humanity seems to have hurdled the species barrier. It has never happened before with any other species. It is one of the great mysteries of nature: we have become a part of the intimate world of dogs." The very fact that dogs and humans share their intimate lives (and yes, in a manner that is different from lives shared with cats, Masson believes, even though he is a cat-lover and cat-owner as well as dog-lover and dog-owner) and feel love for one another is a noteworthy point, as self-evident as it may seem.

Is Masson convincing? For those of us who've lived with dogs and loved dogs (and 35% of U.S. households currently do), it is second-nature, arguably, that our dogs love us and have the capacity to express

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sadness, disappointment, fear, excitement, joy, anticipation, and jealousy, to name just some of the emotions I've seen and readily interpreted in the 13 years I've shared life with my Pomeranian, Gizmo. Masson stretches this roster of emotions further to include empathy and sympathy, and so whether or not Masson is convincing probably depends on whether one is a dog-lover or not, which may, in a sense, defeat Masson's purpose. Yet even for a lifetime dog-lover, he does seem rather idealistic, claiming, for example, that no dog is aggressive who has been raised properly, and dismissing dog bites as occurring mainly in situations where dogs mistake humans for prey, as with male dogs and newborns. He even comments that "a dog's capacity for friendship may indeed far exceed our own." There is something both appealing and frustrating in his simple reverence, and I could not help wondering whether there isn't a more complex relationship between dogs and man than Masson is willing to admit. And yet, despite this comfort with dogs as they have come to coexist with man, Masson does not directly address the question raised by some extreme animal rights groups who believe it is unethical to domesticate an animal or have a dog living in a non-wild state. Masson would seem to disagree fundamentally with this view, but I would have liked to have heard him say why he is so comfortable with a relationship he assures us is not "slavery," but a dependency dogs accept. This is particularly true given his somewhat contradictory (if quite brief and wistful) comment about domestication having taken the best of wolves out of dogs.

Masson's final chapter is his most powerful. In his conclusion, he borrows from many compelling writers in building his case that "humans are not the apex, the very pinnacle of creation, but only part of a larger world. This means that we must share our planet with many other creatures, sentient or not, who have as much right to its bounty and purity as we." He speaks in this final chapter not only of dogs' capacity for love, but of man's capacity for the love of dogs. He is very moving when telling stories of man's coexistence with dogs in history, including a contemporary story of a man who saved a deaf Dalmatian from euthanasia, raising her with sign language and then going on to place other deaf Dalmatians with deaf people. Masson concludes that the dog indeed has a soul, or "core," or "profound essence" — for Masson feels uncomfortable with the religious connotations of the word "soul." This "core," Masson says, for humans "has to do with our ability to reach out and help a member of another species, to devote our energy to the welfare of that species, even when we do not stand to benefit from the other — in short, to love the other for its own sake." He goes on to say that "If any species on earth shares this miraculous ability with us ... it is the dog, for the dog truly loves us sometimes beyond expectations, beyond measure, beyond what we deserve, more, indeed than we love ourselves." Here Masson captures the deep connection between man and dog. Perhaps his greatest achievement in this book is having written feelingly, and yet not overly sentimentally, of the dog, without mirroring his observations in the jargon of social science or any other academic discipline (including his own background in Sanskrit, in which he has a Ph.D., or psychoanalysis, which he studied and practiced). Masson does not set out to "prove" his assertions,

but to use observation and reflection to achieve insight, and in this he is successful.

The minister of my church has said that the one word that should never be spoken in a sermon is "dog" for one is destined to lose at least half the congregation to nostalgic reverie once the image of a dog is brought to their minds. If I've indeed lost some of you to memories of wild romps with a dog willing to climb ladders and pretend to be a horse to please you, or to the way a dog long-gone once greeted you, or to quiet moments on the couch with an ever-accommodating companion, or of a sick dog still willing to weakly wag his tail for you, so be it. Perhaps the best thing that can be said about this book is that it reminds us all how much joy, companionship, and love we give and get in our shared lives with dogs, something that, like so many other good, simple things, is easy to lose sight of as we dash through the endless round of work and social obligations that makes up our lives at the close of the twentieth century. 

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